Madalyn Ruggiero / Special to The Detroit News

Elaine Taylor, 55, of Detroit hangs out with her boys after dinner. She is a foster mother to some of the boys, and some of the others she adopted. Clockwise from left are Niko, Sterling, Robert, Alonzo, Elaine, Karlesio, Gary and Dekari.

NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH

Fostering love

Families adopt abandoned kids, who give love in return

Michael H. Hodges / The Detroit News

After a brief prayer, seven boys, age 10 to 16, tuck into their suppers, heads bent in serious chewing. As the seven push through their corned beef and cabbage with a minimum of small talk, you've got to admit you've seldom seen better table manners.

"You'd be shocked at what some of these babies have been through," says Elaine Taylor, a longtime foster mom, as she emerges from the kitchen with a plate of warm cornbread.

A few examples: Six of Elaine Taylor's seven boys came from homes destroyed by drug use. The seventh has a birth mother overwhelmed by mental problems.

One 5-year-old had to fend for himself and

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two younger siblings for two months in an abandoned house.

Several of them were classified "unplaceable" by the foster-care agency. Yet Taylor has adopted four of her boys, and has the paperwork going on the other three. So here they are, returned from a productive day at school, keeping their elbows off the table and chewing with their mouths closed.

In a world where foster-care nightmares dominate the news -- including the recent deaths of two Michigan toddlers -- you might be surprised at what you would you find in Taylor's modest Detroit home with the inflated turkey out front, or Tom and Brenda Webber's household in Warren.

Both show foster parenting at its best.

As of last June, there were almost 19,000 foster children in the Michigan -- showing a drastic need for foster parents.

It's a role people might assume requires more than it does.

"The only thing special about foster parents is that they're willing to open their homes and hearts," says Addie Williams, president and CEO of the nonprofit Spaulding for Children in Southfield, which specializes in placing older kids and children with special needs.

"You don't have to have a college degree or that high-paying job," she adds. "You just need to have patience and a sense of humor -- and a willingness to accept a child where she or he is, and help them move that one step ahead."

Helping Robert, now 13, move that one step was initially a challenge when he arrived at Taylor's cheerful, crowded household.

Robert, today a likable fellow with a profoundly serious manner, was, oddly, the hardest nut for Taylor to crack.

"He was a rough child," she says.

And who could wonder why? At 5, Robert was deserted by his parents, and spent a couple months living in an abandoned house, trying his level best to take care of his two younger siblings.

Little wonder his trust in adults mostly evaporated.

When he came to live with her three years ago, Taylor didn't think that the grim-faced Robert was ever going to work out.

In the first five or six months, he didn't smile once.

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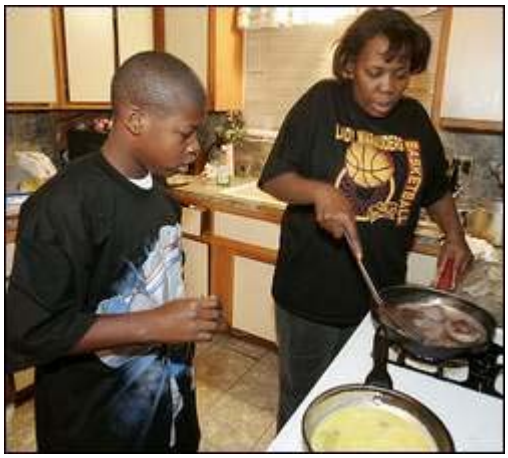

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Interested in becoming a foster parent?

"All you need is room in your heart and room in your home," says Addie Williams, president and CEO of the nonprofit Spaulding for Children.

Well, there are one or two other details. To qualify, prospective foster parents must:

Be 21 or older, either married or single.

Agree to attend training sessions.

Pass a physical exam.

Agree to a home visit by a social worker.

Pass a criminal and protective-services background check.

Provide three letters of recommendation.

Any licensed foster-care agency will be glad to help you get going. Prospective parents interested in kids with special needs might consider calling Spaulding, the only agency in the nation specializing in such children.

Spaulding's phone number in Southfield is (248) 443-7080.

Michael H. Hodges
The Detroit News

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Not once.

But in a family game of Uno a couple years ago, Taylor and Robert found themselves the last two players standing.

"I'm going to get you," Taylor said.

Robert narrowed his eyes.

"No, I'm going to get you."

And he smiled.

"That's when he let me in," Taylor says.

Robert had hardly been a stellar student -- C's were an accomplishment to brag about -- and he skipped more school than he attended.

But once he made up his mind where he wanted to be, Robert told Taylor, "Momma -- if you adopt me, I'll never get suspended again."

He kept his word. Last semester, Robert made the honor roll.

Of course, Taylor does pay $5 per report-card A, so there's a little incentive.

Robert had an inkling that Taylor's might be different from the other homes he'd cycled through, "because when I got here, she talked to me," he says softly.

"No other foster mom had done that."

The truth is, says Taylor, foster kids have often been moved around so much that they come into a new home tough as nails, sure that it's not going to last long.

They've got a simple way to test any adult who claims to like them -- they'll pull out every nasty trick in their arsenal, "all the negative," as Taylor says, and act out till the cows come home.

"They do it just to see if I'll stick it out. And I did. Once it sinks in that they're stuck here with the old girl," says Taylor, "they get reachable."

Taylor comes from a large family. She grew up with 12 siblings.

It was a big-hearted household. As her father always said, "If you can feed two, you feed 10."

That's pretty much what Taylor has ended up doing.

"I love my sons," she says, adding that she only adopts when a child asks her to.

"Believe it or not, I didn't save them. They saved me," says Taylor, whose six biological children are all grown and gone.

In Warren, Tom and Brenda Webber felt called to take in foster children, whom they raised alongside their four biological offspring.

"At the very beginning," says Brenda, as hamburgers fry in her kitchen and teenagers run this way and that, "we took in kids not intending to adopt. But here's the catch -- we ended up adopting all of them."

All six, in fact -- four of whom are still living under the Webber roof.

When a new child comes into her house, Brenda says, "First I have to reassure them I am not trying to replace their parent -- especially with Andre," she says, referring to one of her oldest foster kids, now out on his own, whose biological mother died after he came to live with the Webbers.

"His mother died a very slow death," she says. "I just told him he was lucky -- that he had two families."

When she and Tom first met Vernon and Rico, the last two kids they fostered -- and adopted one year ago -- Brenda recalls the two boys told them that they wanted, "a big brother, a PlayStation, a pet and a home where they wouldn't have to move again."

She adds, "We had all that."

Indeed, Rico and Vernon practically glued themselves to their new older brother, Tom Jr., following him around like obedient puppies.

Rico, now 12, says he had gone through four foster homes before landing with the Webbers.

Of his other foster parents, he says simply, "They were mean. Real mean."

The system badly needs more -- and in some cases, better -- foster parents. While there are 2,300 more kids in foster care than there were 10 years ago, the number of homes willing to take them in has barely grown.

At Spaulding for Children, Williams agrees, saying, "What we've seen in the past few years is a decline in new families coming in."

It's a shortfall that baffles Taylor, for whom fostering -- and adopting -- fills up her life.

"People don't know how good it feels to do this," she says. "I wish I could scream it from the top of my lungs, 'This is a good thing. Get a support group together, and do it.' "

You can reach Michael H. Hodges at (313) 222-6021 or mhodges @detnews.com.

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